

Sallie in New York and apologized for a sloppy letter because her “head is so full of the scary times I don’t know what to do.” Sallie later received a letter from her mother in Wilmington who described election day as one of “intense uneasiness . . . no one can realize the torture or suspense until experienced.”³⁵

Other Wilmingtonians were not as susceptible to the propaganda that generated much of the fear among residents. Businessman Robert Mason wrote his cousin on election day that all was quiet and that the situation was exaggerated by the newspapers and “in the excited minds of some of the extremists.” He expressed his hopes that the “conservative elements will keep things down.” In response to fears among his workers that a riot was imminent, Mason claimed that it was “idiotic” to close the mill since he thought that to do so would acknowledge a threat that he perceived did not exist.³⁶ The sentiment, reflected by the upper-class businessmen, was that the threat of violence was sufficient and they hoped to avoid actual violence. Upper class insider Louis Meares wrote that he had “great confidence in the ability of our people to suppress the indiscretion of a certain class of whites who are inclined to urge a conflict and so to smooth over the pending trouble.”³⁷

The White Government Union emerged as a primary outlet for the dissemination of information and the

organization of the citizenry in the city. Attorney William B. McKoy and other Wilmington leaders organized WGU meetings throughout the city, and, by mid-August, Wilmington had a WGU in every ward, its members proudly displaying their large white “White Government Union” campaign buttons. WGU meetings took place at regular intervals and the newspapers advertised meeting times and places for each ward and precinct. Most of the meetings took place in prominent locations such as the office of congressional candidate John D. Bellamy Jr., the office of William B. McKoy, Democratic headquarters in the old National Bank Building, or the Seaboard Air Line Railroad building. Membership was open to anyone who desired “decent government,” including women who could participate in meetings but had no vote in club decisions. The night before the election, Wilmington’s WGU met in a joint session at the courthouse under the chairmanship of Frank Stedman, with all individual WGU clubs in attendance. After speeches by Waddell and Bellamy, the group named over 150 men to attend polls in their wards and precincts all day during the election, asked businesses that employed voters who planned to vote Democratic to close, and appointed an additional group of over eighty men to represent the candidates during ballot counting.³⁸

The bridge between the WGU and the Red Shirt/Rough Rider phenomenon is much more evident in Wilmington. Mike Dowling, admitted leader of Red Shirt/Rough Rider activity and member of a WGU stated that the club sought to win the election “at all hazards and by any means

³⁵ Mary Parsley to Sallie, November 2, 1898, Eccles Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection; Mother to Sallie, November 9, 1898, Eccles Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

³⁶ Mason was the cashier for the North Carolina Cotton Oil Company. R. Beverly Mason to Bess, November 8, 1898, John Steele Henderson Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill; 1897 *Wilmington City Directory*.

³⁷ Louis Meares to Richard Meares, November 5, 1898, Meares and de Rosset Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

³⁸ *Morning Star* (Wilmington), August 11, 18, 19, 25, 26, 27, 1898; *Morning Star* (Wilmington), September 2, 3, 9, 18, 21, 22, 1898; *Evening Dispatch* (Wilmington), August 24, 25, 1898; *Evening Dispatch* (Wilmington), October 8, 24, 1898; *Wilmington Messenger*, November 8, 1898.